

# Isaiah 7–8: Part II

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## 1 Introduction

This set of lecture notes continues the discussion of Isaiah 7–8. Last time we examined the sign of Immanuel in its own historical setting (vv. 7:1–17). We noted that the sign serves as a reminder of the presence of the Holy One of Israel among His people, holding them accountable for their pledge of loyalty. By choosing to trust Assyria rather than God, Ahaz compromised the vocation of Judah, and thereby leading Judah into idolatry. In this sense, the symbol of Immanuel is more of a threat to maintain holiness and loyalty than a consolation. To this Oswalt said it best:

If ever Israel is to become the servant nation, through whom God chose to manifest himself to the world, then the most basic truth she must learn is that God can be trusted, whereas the nations cannot. If she continues to refuse dependence upon God, while attempting to depend on the nations, then she has neither message nor hope. But if she has indeed encountered a God who is greater than all the nations combined and who can, in fact, be depended upon in every situation, then she has something to declare.

This time, we will look at a second dimension of the message of Immanuel, essentially the flip side of the coin. We will trace how the Isaianic corpus transforms the symbol of Immanuel into a messianic one that the historical church came to confess (Matthew 1:23), a symbol marking the return of divine protection. We conclude by noting how this two-edged nature of the Immanuel message speaks to our Christian vocation.

## 2 The Rocky Road from a Historical Reading to a Canonical Reading

Last time we noted that interpreting the sign of Immanuel (v. 7:14) is not an easy task. The crux of the difficulty is twofold. First, the traditional messianic reading of the sign, based on Luke's report of virgin birth, is completely out of the historical context of Ch. 7. Second, the word "virgin" in its original language means "a young woman of marriageable age." Yet, the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek translation of the Old Testament as quoted by Matthew) renders the word "virgin", thereby introducing retrospectively a connotation of virginity not necessarily intended by Isaiah. Honoring the historical integrity of the text, we interpreted Immanuel sign in its own historical setting. Yet, a question of canonical integrity presents itself: how has the sign of Immanuel come to acquire a

Messianic meaning so passionately celebrated by the historical church? To address this question, we first review the nature of a sign in prophetic literature.

### 3 What is in a Sign?

In the prophetic books, a sign is a visible guarantee, usually in the form of special or even miraculous events, of a prophecy yet to be fulfilled (e.g., 1 Samuel 2:34; 10:1–8). The realization of the sign is not the fulfillment of the prophecy, but rather a pointer to the fulfillment of the prophecy. An example can be found in vv. 8:1–4.

[8:1–4]

- This event occurred after the encounter described in Ch. 7.
- v. 1: A symbol was enacted: “Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz” means “quick to plunder, swift to the spoil”.
- v. 2: The enactment of the mysterious symbol was witnessed by trustworthy parties.
- v. 3: The symbol was turned into a physical sign by Isaiah’s son bearing it as a name.
- v. 4: The birth of the child is not what the sign points to. Instead, it points to a future fulfillment of a prophecy — that Syria and Israel would be destroyed by Assyria. As clouds suggest raining, the child reaching a certain age marked the fulfillment of the prophecy.

Understanding the function of a sign in general allows us to understand the function of the sign of Immanuel in Chapter 7. The birth of the Immanuel child is *not* the object of prophecy. It is merely a mark, a pledge, a guarantee for the prophesied peaceful resolution of the Syrio-Ephriamite War as well as the subsequent divine judgment via the invasion of Assyria.

### 4 The Messianic Transformation of the Immanuel Symbol

The transformation of the Immanuel sign into a symbol of messianic hope occurs in vv. 8:5–10.

[5–8]

- v. 5: The rejoicing over Rezin and Pekah in v. 6 probably suggests that the Assyrian army had already lifted the threat of the Syrio-Ephriamite coalition by the time this oracle was pronounced.
- v. 6: Isaiah compares the quiet protection of God to a little stream by the name of Shiloah, which was the main water supply of Jerusalem at the time of Ahaz.
- v. 7: Because Ahaz and Judah chose to trust Assyria rather than the God of Shiloah, the Assyrian king would be summoned to bring judgment to this people. The latter was compared to the fierce water of Euphrates.

- v. 8: The flooding would reach the neck! And at this point the prophet exclaims, “O Immanuel!” Is this a lament of the now-realized threat that was symbolized by the Immanuel child, or is this a transformation of the sign into a designation of the God who is with us, and thus an outcry of the prophet for divine mercy? I believe it is both.

#### [9–10]

- And yet it is at this point the prophet remembers the second layer of meaning for the Immanuel symbol — that this is the land of God, the God who was and is and will be with us.
- vv. 9–10 is a decisively messianic message sharing the same hope and language with Psalm 2, a well-known messianic psalm<sup>1</sup>. The messianic hope is justified by a final assertion of Immanuel — “for God is with us!”
- Now the transformation is complete. The Holy One of Israel, who holds us accountable for our faithfulness and loyalty, is also the One who will always remember His covenant with Abraham, the victorious One who will return one day to destroy the evil that oppresses us.

## 5 The Two-Edged Sword

The two-edged nature of the message of Immanuel is articulated in its fullest in God’s personal message to Isaiah in the next section.

#### [11–18]

- v. 11: The strong hand of God probably signify a very intense experience of the prophet.
- vv. 12–13: Although the mentioning of conspiracy is a difficult point of interpretation, the overall meaning of this verse is clear. When people react with paranoia and political conspiracies, remember who truly deserves your fear and dread. This echoes the core emotion of the passage — fear (7:2).
- vv. 14–15: To those who trusts in the Lord, He will become a refuge (what “sanctuary” means in this context). Yet, for those who refuse to place their trust in him, but rather seek refuge in worldly wisdom and political stratagem, God becomes stumbling block, a trap and a snare.
- vv. 16–17: The prophet affirms his loyalty even when the rest of Judah is hidden from the face of God.
- v. 18: By staying loyal to God in a time of betrayal, the prophet *and* his children (i.e., Shear-Jashub (v. 7:3) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (v. 8:3)) became signs and symbols pointing to the dwelling of God in Israel — Immanuel, God is with us.

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<sup>1</sup>The messianic nature of Psalm 2 is obvious from its equating the king to the son of God, a theme that is unmistakably messianic when seen with the backdrop of 2 Samuel 7.